

## THE POLITICS OF POVERTY IN SCOTLAND

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This chapter is in two parts. The first part offers an assessment of the Scottish debate on poverty over the last fifteen years, and attempts to relate some of the key features of the debate to political developments of the period. The second part offers an overview of the Scottish response to the Government's proposals for the reform of the social security system which culminated in the Social Security Act of July 1986.

Four broad conclusions are suggested by the material surveyed. First, and most obviously, the poverty debate in Scotland has been more tightly confined by practical considerations of policy and politics than the debate south of the Border. Second, and partly as a consequence, the mainstream tradition of poverty analysis in Scotland has been largely derivative with no significant contribution to the theoretical debates initiated by Professor Peter Townsend and others. Third, an important stimulus to the development of the debate in Scotland has been an arms-length dialogue between Nationalists and unionists in the shape of Labour Party members and supporters which neither set of protagonists has been keen to acknowledge. Fourth, over the fifteen year period there has been a distinct though limited strengthening of the Scottish dimension of the debate.

For two decades after the Second World War British opinion believed that the creation of a social security system based on Beveridge with a National Assistance Board as a final safety net had eliminated poverty in Britain. Scottish doubts were slower to appear on the agenda of public debate than south of the border where from 1965 the orthodoxy was under attack by the Child Poverty Action Group.

The first major public breach of the conventional wisdom in Scotland did not come until 1973 and then not from a Scottish source but from a report by the National Children's Bureau *Born to Fail*<sup>(1)</sup>. The report claimed that while one in sixteen children in Britain were severely disadvantaged by their social and economic circumstances in Scotland the proportion was one in ten.

The National Children's Bureau figures were released at a time when Scottish political and economic perspectives were adapting to the prospect of Scotland becoming a major oil producer. In the Govan by-election of 1973 the Scottish National Party's emphasis on the contrast between the

wealth potentially available to Scotland from the North Sea oil and the poverty and dilapidation so evident in many parts of the constituency was widely held to have been an important factor in SNP's surprise victory.

The SNP developed the contrast between Scottish poverty and Scottish wealth in its two General Election campaigns of 1974 and in the *War on Poverty* policy document launched at the Party Conference of June 1974.<sup>(2)</sup> Adapting estimates by the Child Poverty Action Group that one in five in the United Kingdom lived on incomes below 140% of the supplementary benefit rate, *War on Poverty* claimed that when Scotland's higher unemployment, lower incomes, higher costs and harsh climate were taken into account "the proportion of the Scottish population enduring a real standard of living below or very close to the supplementary benefit rate must be substantially higher than in the United Kingdom".

In response to the rise of the SNP, the Left in Scotland<sup>(3)</sup> published *The Red Paper on Scotland*. In his introduction editor Gordon Brown presented the Paper as an effort to "transcend" the "barren, myopic, almost suffocating consensus" of the "great debate" provoked by Nationalism. On a slightly less exalted level the book was an attempt to restore to the Labour Left in Scotland that degree of initiative on social and economic issues which had been lost to radical Nationalists in the early 1970's, and in so doing to re-establish the primacy of social and economic inequalities over the Nationalist division between England and Scotland.

In the chapter which dealt most directly with poverty, the author Ian Levitt confirmed, without acknowledging, SNP's estimate of the scale of Scotland's poverty problem.<sup>(4)</sup> But he adopted the standard United Kingdom 'income measure' of poverty without even a footnote acknowledgement that differences in price levels and in volume need in Scotland for some basic commodities such as fuel might have a significant impact on the incidence of 'real' as opposed to 'income' poverty.

The extent and distribution of Scottish poverty was further illuminated in 1977 by the publication of the Child Poverty Action Group pamphlet *Poverty: the Facts in Scotland*.<sup>(5)</sup> The pamphlet represented the first significant intervention in the Scottish debate by the London-based poverty lobby.

Although forthright in its acknowledgement of the political dimension of Scotland's poverty debate, Norris's pamphlet remained firmly in the unionist mainstream in its analysis. It did indeed acknowledge that as a standard money measure the supplementary benefit rate was defective as a measure of poverty. But because of the absence of Regional Price Indices and the paucity of other information on price levels it retained the income standard as its measure.

In the autumn of 1975 SNP launched a series of posters affirming the right to Scotland's oil wealth of four representative groups of deprived Scots – the unemployed, children in disadvantaged families, the low-income housewife enduring run-down housing and the pensioner. The plight of the latter group was illustrated by the claim that five thousand elderly Scots were dying each year from hypothermia. The claim provoked an outraged response from the Labour Party. In the Commons Scottish Secretary Willie Ross asserted that only nine Scots had died of hypothermia in the preceding year. In a controversy which turned largely on the distinction between deaths from hypothermia and deaths from cold-related diseases, SNP supported its claims by quoting estimates by Age Concern Scotland that between three and five thousand deaths from cold-related diseases occurred in Scotland each year. In the unusually cold Spring of 1976 the SNP developed its case by calling for some financial acknowledgement by the Government of the particular problems and dangers faced by old people in Scotland. Its credibility on the issue was enhanced in 1978 by the publication by an independent academic analyst of an estimate that 70,000 Scots pensioners were at risk from hypothermia<sup>(6)</sup>, and in 1979 by the estimate by a Scottish based expert that it took 20% more fuel to heat a house to a given temperature in Glasgow than in Bristol and 30% more in Aberdeen.<sup>(7)</sup>

The publicity generated by the SNP around its hypothermia claims fell in the middle of a period of rapid increases in domestic fuel prices. In 1975, the peak year of increase, electricity prices increased by 41%, gas prices by 35.2%, coal by 26.8%, oil by 28.3% and paraffin by 19.4%.<sup>(8)</sup> Concern about the impact which such price rises were having on the ability of low-income households to provide themselves with adequate heating contributed to the creation of the Scottish Fuel Poverty Action Group in 1978.

The Scottish Fuel Poverty Action Group is the nearest thing that Scotland has had to a nationally organised poverty lobby. Although it focusses on one dimension of poverty, the status of fuel as entirely a market commodity and the importance it has in the budgets of low-income households make its price an important determinant of income poverty in general.

The SFPAG identified specifically Scottish factors – the higher rate of increase of fuel prices, defects in the construction of much of Scotland's post-war public housing and, of course, climatic differences – as contributing to the exceptionally high level of disconnections of electricity supply in Scotland due to non-payment of bills. While its first two publications had general United Kingdom policy targets – the repeal of legislation giving fuel boards the right to disconnect, a comprehensive fuel allowance scheme, the raising of building standards and a programme of improved insulation – the third concluded with a call for a Scottish Fuel

Policy embracing SNP MP Gordon Wilson's Bill for a Cold Climate Allowance adjusted to differences in the cost of heating a home to a standard temperature in different areas of the United Kingdom.<sup>(9)</sup>

The mainstream of Scottish writing on poverty continued remarkably resistant to the significance of the hypothermia and fuel poverty controversies. Its most recent expression *The Real Divide: Poverty and Deprivation in Scotland*<sup>(10)</sup>, edited by two Scottish Labour MP's Gordon Brown and Robin Cook, contains valuable up-dates of the statistics traditionally deployed in the mainstream discussions as well as important new information on low pay in Scotland and on changes in Scotland's occupational structure. But its analysis of poverty is conservative, if not regressive. It adopts the standard United Kingdom income-measure of poverty without comment. The issue of price differentials is simply ignored. Fuel poverty receives only a passing reference in the chapter on poverty among pensioners and there is no discussion of the special problem of rural poverty.

There are, of course, methodological reasons for cleaving to a standard United Kingdom income measure of poverty. The absence of official regional price indices means that there is no official standard on which to base regional comparisons of purchasing power of the sort that the supplementary benefit rate provides for comparisons of income levels. Furthermore regional differences in prices tell us little by themselves about the standard of living or 'welfare' which a standard income can purchase. As the example of fuel shows, the quantity of the commodity required to achieve the agreed standard of welfare may be more important than the price. In Scotland fuel prices are generally lower than in England but the greater quantity of fuel required to heat a house to the same level as a house in the south of England makes the cost of heating in Scotland higher than in the south by a factor of 20% or more. And differences in volume of other basic commodities – most obviously clothing and footwear but also food and housing – may interact with prices to extend the differences in the purchasing power of standard incomes.

Even if standardised information were available on these factors the quantification of their impact would be an impossible task. The extension of poverty can be measured but not its intensity. The suffering of a pensioner in Scotland who endures lower room temperatures than her counterpart in the south of England cannot be measured on any common scale. No more can the loss of vitality suffered by children in low-income Scots families where a standard United Kingdom welfare income fails to cover the greater volume needs for heating, or wet weather wear or food. Sickness rates and mortality rates can be no more than suggestive: they cannot measure the 'intensity' of poverty of those who survive in some approximation to health.

Yet these methodological difficulties or incompatibilities do not excuse the neglect which the underlying issues have suffered from writers on Scottish poverty. There is a reputable if unofficial series of regional price indices for different socio-economic groups (Reward Regional Surveys).<sup>(11)</sup> The concept of 'purchasing power parity' is available to guide the researcher on at least one stage of inquiry. It is disappointing that social scientists in the Scottish universities have not shown greater curiosity.

The Government's Green Paper *The Reform of Social Security* was published in June 1985.<sup>(12)</sup> It proposed the abolition of State Earning Related Pensions (SERPS) and the replacement of supplementary benefit by a system of income support supplemented by client group premiums advertised as absorbing the standard additional allowances. Family Income Support (FIS) was also to be replaced by a Family Credit paid through the employer. Children in families receiving Family Credit would no longer be eligible for free school meals or milk and local authorities were to lose their discretion to give free school meals to children not on benefit. Single payments for special needs were to be replaced by discretionary loans or grants from a Social Fund. Single people under twenty five living independently were to suffer a major cut in benefit. Housing benefit was to be rationalised but everyone however low their income would be expected to pay at least 20% of their rates. The proposals were widely interpreted as weakening the 'universalist' foundations of the welfare state and forcing people to a greater reliance on the market for social provision in the name of rationalisation and superior targeting of resources.

This account of the Scottish response to the Green Paper and the assessments it offers is largely impressionistic. The only quantitative evidence on which to assess the strength of the Scottish response is provided by a computer print-out of the titles of those organisations which made formal responses to the Green Paper, supplied by the DHSS in December 1985. Of the 1,742 entries, 149 – 8.5% – were from identifiably Scottish organisations suggesting a ratio of response from Scotland approximately proportionate to Scotland's share of the United Kingdom's population.

Some tentative generalisations are suggested by a reading of a sample of the English and Scottish responses. The Scottish response is weaker on expert analysis, no doubt a consequence of the concentration of research bodies and specialist lobbies in London. On the other hand the reader receives a strong impression that the Scottish response is more uniform and 'solidaristic'. The sources of that impression are clear enough. Conspicuously absent from the list of Scottish respondents are the Scottish branches or counterparts of the Institute of Directors, the Monday Club or the Association of British Chambers of Commerce which in an analysis of the response of 60 British organisations carried out by the Child Poverty Action Group were the chief sources of support for the Government's proposals.<sup>(13)</sup>

The second source of the impression of a more 'solidaristic' Scottish response is the presence among the Scottish respondents of organisations such as the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Trades' Union Congress (STUC) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) with a plausible claim to be representative if not of a Scottish consensus at least of large segments of Scottish opinion.

When the Government's Green Paper was published in June 1985 Scotland was no better equipped organisationally to make a strong and distinctive response than it was intellectually. Scotland had no national poverty lobby to perform the educational and lobbying role which the Child Poverty Action Group carried out in London. The research institutes with a specialised interest in social policy issues – the Policy Studies Institute, the Family Policy Studies' Centre, the Low Pay Unit, the Institute for Fiscal Studies – were all London based. While the departments of social administration in the Scottish universities offer courses in social policy, there are no social policy units at Scottish universities comparable to the Policy Units at York and Bristol universities and few specialists in social security issues. The Scottish media were conspicuously lacking in expertise on social issues. Indeed the entire Scottish media could boast only a single designated correspondent in the shape of a Social Services' Correspondent with *The Glasgow Herald*.

There were, however, some positive factors. One was the presence in positions of influence within Labour-controlled local authorities of a younger generation of Party members, some professionally trained in social work or community education or with a specialised interest in urban deprivation, many of whom were familiar with the poverty debate as it had developed in Britain since the late 1960's. Another was the not unconnected growth in parts of central Scotland at least, of a network of Welfare Rights Officers supported by local authorities. Another was the established presence of a group of specialised voluntary organisations with sizeable reservoirs of information on the circumstances and problems of their particular client groups.

The Scottish response to the Government's proposals can be most conveniently considered under six headings – the voluntary sector response, the media response, the political response embracing Parliamentary and party responses, the local authority response, and the trade union and Church response.

#### **The voluntary sector**

Among the national voluntary sector organisations which responded actively were Scottish Women's Aid, the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Shelter Scotland, the Scottish Council

for Single Parents, the Scottish Council for the Single Homeless, Age Concern Scotland, the Scottish Council on Disability and Scottish Neighbourhood Energy Action.

Age Concern Scotland was among the most active of these specialist voluntary organisations and its activity spans the range of initiatives taken by the other organisations.

Prior to the publication of the Green Paper, Age Concern organised a delegation including senior Church representatives to Westminster for meetings with parliamentary groups of MP's. Its formal response to the Green Paper focussed on a number of issues of particular Scottish concern including cuts in housing benefit estimated to cost 150,000 Scots pensioners £1-£2 weekly, the requirement to pay a minimum 20% of rates costing 200,000 Scots pensioners an average of £1.25 weekly, and the abolition of heating additions claimed at the higher rate by 36,000 Scots. Under the campaign slogan *The Pen is Mightier than the Sword* Age Concern encouraged its supporters and local groups to press the case against the reforms with their MP's. Early in 1986 the organisation circulated a response to the Government's White Paper of December, *In Jeopardy: Dignity In Old Age*, to all Scottish MP's. At the legislative stage beginning in February 1986, it sent suggestions for amendments to Scottish MP's and embarked on a campaign to encourage the take-up of benefits. Throughout the period its officers maintained close contact with the Scottish media and secured a steady flow of coverage for its initiatives.

The other leading specialist voluntary organisations pursued the same range of initiatives – briefings to members and MP's, press contacts, the circulation of recommended amendments – each focussing on those proposals which most directly threatened their particular client group – Scottish Women's Aid the payment of Family Credit through the employer, the Scottish Council for Single Parents the loss of single payments, the Scottish Council for Single Homeless cuts in benefits for the under-25's, Shelter Scotland the impact of the 20% minimum rates' payment, the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children the loss of free school meals.

In addition to their individual activities the leading specialist organisations were members of a group of national voluntary organisations co-ordinated by the Scottish Council for Community and Voluntary Organisations.

The Scottish Council for Community and Voluntary Organisations (SCCVO) had taken an active interest in the social security reforms since 1984 when it had objected to the fact that none of the four Review groups established by Social Services' Secretary Norman Fowler planned to hold a hearing outside London. When in response to the complaints the

Supplementary Benefits Review group visited Edinburgh the Scottish Council gave evidence arguing, *inter alia*, for a general increase in the value of benefits and the extension of long-term supplementary rates to the long-term unemployed.

In early 1985 the SCCVO convened a meeting of interested voluntary organisations to discuss how the voluntary sector's interest in the social security debate could be advanced. Agreement was reached that the Council should have a dual role – first to ensure that its own two hundred very diverse members were adequately briefed on the reform proposals, on their likely impact on clients, and on the opportunities for making representations to the policy makers, and second to service a grouping of national voluntary organisations which would have the task of co-ordinating voluntary sector publicity at Scottish and United Kingdom levels and providing a network for the exchange of information.

The grouping of national voluntary organisations agreed that their activities should be guided by two principles. One was that the group should focus on the distinctively Scottish impact of the reforms, on the understanding that the London-based Social Security Consortium co-ordinated by the Child Poverty Action Group would base their lobbying on the overall United Kingdom impact of the reforms. The second was that the impact of the voluntary sector's representations on Conservative opinion would be reinforced if voluntary organisations which traditionally remained aloof from campaigns on politically controversial issues could be mobilised in support.

The group of national voluntary organisations opened its activities by lobbying the Scottish media, by deputation or letter, with the argument that the proposed reforms merited the extensive and critical coverage appropriate to an issue of major national import. In the political arena, it sent deputations to meet party representatives, in the House of Commons prior to the Social Security Bill's first reading in January 1986, and in the House of Lords prior to the committee stage of the Bill in June 1986. In addition the Group maintained contact with the two Scottish members of the Standing Committee on the Bill, encouraged its members to provide the MP's with suggestions for amendments and with briefing materials, and organised a meeting in Edinburgh with Social Security Minister Tony Newton to put to him the by then familiar litany of Scottish concerns.

Meantime the SCCVO was active in its own name. Prior to the publication of the Green Paper the Council began the publication of a short series of briefing papers<sup>(14)</sup> which described the extent and characteristics of poverty in Scotland, summarised the key proposals of the Green Paper and of the White Paper and identified their impact on vulnerable groups of Scots. SCCVO's formal response to the Green Paper described the factors which contributed to the particular severity of Scotland's problem of

poverty and suggested that for "cultural, social and institutional reasons" Scotland was ill-equipped to benefit from measures designed to strengthen the role of the market in social provisions. Among the particular dangers for Scotland which the submission highlighted were the replacement of single payments by a discretionary Social Fund, the proposal for a minimum 20% rates contribution, the loss of heating additions, the continued discrimination against the long-term unemployed, and the lowering of benefit levels for the under twenty-five year olds. The submission concluded that the Government's proposals failed to offer any hope of halting let alone reversing the spread of poverty in Scotland.

The Council also made its assessment of the proposals known to the Social Security Advisory Committee through a meeting with the Chairman and a series of meetings with its then sole Scottish member.

The Council's estimate of the number of Scots in poverty – 970,000 or 18.7% of the population living at or below supplementary benefit rates and 1,641,000 (31.7%) living below 140% of the supplementary rate – was accepted as standard by the Scottish respondents. But the Council's most purposeful intervention was the organisation of an Open Letter to Scottish Secretary George Younger emphasising the dangers for Scotland of the Green Paper's proposal to replace single payments and additional allowances by loans from a discretionary Social Fund and urging him to bring to the Cabinet's attention the problems which such a change could cause in a part of the United Kingdom in which both the incidence and the value of single payments were twice the level in England. The letter which received full coverage in *The Scotsman* and *The Glasgow Herald* was subscribed by thirty-eight voluntary organisations, including the Royal British Legion Scotland, the Earl Haig Fund, the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes and fifteen local Councils of Social Service.

Another level of voluntary sector activity was represented by the grass-roots 'network' campaigns of the National Campaign Against Social Security Cuts (NCASSC) and the Scottish Campaign Against Social Security (SCASSC).

The Scottish Campaign was born from a meeting in mid-1984 between representatives of Claimants' Groups, Tenants' Advice Groups and Welfare Rights Officers to discuss the joint threat of the DHSS 'snoopers' operating in Scotland and the creation of the social security review groups. It was conceived as a facility for the exchange of information and contacts, and neither formulated its own views on the reforms nor directly initiated campaigning activity. Its role was undercut by the growth of locally based campaigning groups and by the consolidation of the National Campaign. After meeting eight times at the initiative of its volunteer secretary the Campaign was suspended in mid-1985.

The National Campaign was the successor to the National Campaign Against the Supplementary Benefit Review of 1978 which drew its active members from Claimants' Unions, Law Centres, and Citizens' Rights Offices. With the change of Government in 1979 it altered its name and widened its remit only to lose much of its momentum.

Like the Scottish Campaign the National Campaign was more concerned with organisation and campaigning than with policy assessment, but it differed from its Scottish counterpart in directly promoting the creation of local groups and organising campaign activities. Where the mainstream voluntary sector focussed on specific proposals – usually those with a Scottish impact – and directed its case mainly at opinion-leaders, the National Campaign reflected United Kingdom concerns and sought to encourage a mass opposition to the reforms.

### The Scottish Media

The Scottish media face a double handicap in covering social security issues, one external and one self-imposed. The external handicap is its distance from the locus of policy-making and the consequent difficulty of obtaining 'insider' information. The self-imposed handicap is its failure – with one exception – to equip itself with specialist writers on social welfare issues. In discussion with voluntary organisation representatives, senior editorial staff identified two further obstacles to wide coverage specifically of the social security reforms – the technical complexity of the issues and the assumed resistance of their readers to a diet of stories about Scotland's social failures. The representations which the group of national voluntary organisations made to the Scottish media to recognise the national importance of the proposed reforms elicited more positive response from Scottish newspaper journalists than from Scottish broadcasters.

In addition to giving news coverage to the formal Scottish responses to the Green Paper and opening their columns to opinion pieces and round-robin letters from concerned organisations and individuals, both *The Scotsman* and *The Glasgow Herald* devoted several leader articles to the issue. *The Scotsman* carried six leaders in the year from June 1985, all hostile to the market philosophy and the ethical assumptions of the Government's reforms. The most critical of the articles acknowledged Scotland's especially vulnerability to the reforms and went on to complain that efforts by the SCCVO and others to co-ordinate a Scottish response were handicapped by the lack of any Scottish Office responsibility or capacity for assessing the effects of the reforms in Scotland.<sup>(15)</sup>

While *The Glasgow Herald* through its Social Services' Correspondent gave more extensive coverage to both the Scottish impact of the reforms and to the views of what it tentatively identified as the emerging Scottish 'poverty lobby', the tone of its leader articles was sceptical rather than

condemnatory, focussing on the Government's failure to integrate the benefits system with the tax system, or challenging it to comment on a survey by Strathclyde Region of key groups of social work clients which showed a far higher proportion losing income than in the Government's own figures.

If the Scottish 'quality' papers did their duty by the issue the same cannot be said for Scottish broadcasters. Senior editorial staff were evidently unimpressed by representations by the voluntary organisations. There was no major feature or documentary style coverage of the issue on any Scottish radio or television channel. Coverage was limited on radio to news items and 'talk' shows such as the Jimmy Mack show and Colin Bell's 'Taking Issue', and on television to routine studio debate between party spokespersons on the weekly current affairs programmes late on Friday nights.

### The trade unions

The distinctive element in the trade union response in Scotland was provided by the Scottish Trades' Union Congress. (STUC). The STUC had long had a recognised role as a national forum on industrial and employment issues, but has less often sought a major role on social issues. However in October 1985 the Congress added a new element to the Scottish debate by convening a day conference to discuss a draft *Charter of Welfare Rights*<sup>(16)</sup> setting out guidelines for an alternative reform of the social security system.

The STUC initiative was important for two reasons. If the Scottish response had been impressive in the variety of organisations contributing their opinions it had also been fragmented, with each group pursuing its own strategy. The STUC initiative succeeded in attracting support from all the major groups – voluntary sector, the Churches, tenants' associations and unemployed workers' centres, trades' unions and two political parties (Labour and the SNP). Furthermore by presenting an alternative strategy for reform it marked a departure from the defensiveness of the other responses. In its final version the STUC's Charter opened with a condemnation of the impact of the Green Paper's proposals on Scotland before proceeding to offer some basic principles for an alternative social security system based on a universal right to a minimum income sufficient to purchase a standard of living reflecting the standards and expectations of society as a whole.

However boldly conceived as an attempt to turn the tables on the Government, the STUC initiative was flawed. It strengthened the sense of national solidarity among committed Scottish opponents of the Government's proposals but failed either to transform the terms of debate or to extend the constituency of support. It came too late – four months

after the publication of the Green Paper – to influence the responses of most Scottish organisations. The Charter itself was too selective and rhetorical to carry credibility as an alternative model. And unlike STUC initiatives on some key industrial issues it lacked the support of bodies such as the CBI Scotland and the Scottish Council (Development and Industry), not to speak of the Liberal Party the SDP and at least some elements of the Conservative party, which might have supported its claim to be the vehicle of an emerging Scottish consensus.

#### The local authorities

Of Scotland's sixty-five local authorities, twenty three are recorded as having submitted formal responses to the Green Paper in addition to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADWS). Twenty-seven supported a STUC petition in support of the *Charter of Welfare Rights*.

Notable among the respondents was Strathclyde Region. Strathclyde had had the most consistent record of action on poverty issues, reflecting its size, its disproportionate share of Scotland's poor and Labour's monopoly of control. Among its notable initiatives have been the pioneering in Scotland of local authority provision of a Welfare Rights service and the raising of a Court action against the DHSS in an attempt to obtain increased benefits for recipients facing the inflated costs of living on remote islands. Strathclyde's response was both practical and educational. It gave support to the organisation of a Strathclyde Campaign Against Cuts in Benefit and financial support to a Strathclyde Poverty Alliance based on the voluntary sector and co-ordinated by Glasgow Council of Voluntary Service. Its most effective educational initiative was the publication of a survey by the Social Work Department of the effect of the reforms on local groups of clients which revealed that 87% of those surveyed would lose financially by the reforms compared to the Government's figures of 32% losers overall.<sup>(17)</sup> The Strathclyde figures were used to challenge Social Security Minister Tony Newton at meetings with the ASDW and with the group of national voluntary organisations. Another notable educational initiative by local authorities was the Lothian Review of Social Security supported by the Regional Council and four District Councils to survey the pattern of need in Lothian and pre-empt the anticipated Government cuts by presenting alternative reforms.<sup>(18)</sup> Among Conservative controlled Councils, Grampian Regional Council broadly echoed the criticisms of its fellow Councils with Tayside alone offering the Government positive support. The COSLA response was predictably condemnatory though, slightly less predictably, it complained that Scotland had not been treated by the Green Paper as the 'special case' which its exceptional problems warranted.

#### The Scottish churches

Four Scottish Churches made formal submissions to the DHSS on the Green Paper, all critical – the Church of Scotland, the United Free Church of Scotland, the Baptist Union of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church. The Congregational Union of Scotland sent a representative to the first conference convened by the STUC. The notable absentees were the Episcopal Church and the Free Church, neither of which responded formally to the Green Paper or attended the STUC conference. Characteristically the Roman Catholic Church as represented by the Scottish National Commission for Catholic Social Care the official group appointed by the Roman Catholic Bishops of Scotland to deal with issues of social care was the least inhibited by the political identity of the STUC and was the only Church group to sponsor the completed Charter of Welfare Rights. The Church and Nation Committee of the Church of Scotland, an early enthusiast for the STUC initiative, felt constrained by political considerations to stop short of public sponsorship.

#### The political response

The responses of the Scottish political parties were unexpectedly low-key. The Scottish Council of the Labour Party made no formal response to the Green Paper. Instead it circulated to its associations and branches a briefing paper by Gordon Brown MP which included estimates of the Scottish impact of the reforms based on leaked DHSS documents. However eight Labour Party Associations or branches did submit responses largely on the lines of Brown's briefing.

The formal SNP response took the form of the submission to the DHSS of a highly polemical resolution adopted at its September 1985 conference explaining the background to Scotland's poverty and contrasting it with Scotland's wealth. The Scottish Liberal Party produced a response which in the course of calling on the Government to reconsider the reforms with the aim of integrating the tax and social security systems limited its Scottish references to a single paragraph acknowledging the greater extent and intensity of Scottish poverty. The SDP in Scotland made no formal response but circulated a briefing paper on the White Paper of December 1985 dismissing it as a 'hypocritically pious document' and noting that nearly one-fifth of Scots were living on or below the supplementary rate and one-third on incomes below 140% of the rate.

The downbeat response of the Labour Party was also evident in its Parliamentary conduct. The only Scottish Labour MP nominated for the Standing Committee of the Bill was Willie McKelvey MP for Kilmarnock who had no public record of interest or expertise in the issue. McKelvey was replaced on health grounds by Norman Godman MP for Greenock and Port Glasgow who prefaced his opening contribution to the Committee proceedings by disclaiming any expertise on the subject. It is surprising in view of the extent of Scotland's problem of poverty and the severe impact

the reforms will have on large sections of Labour's traditional supporters that the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Group did not secure more senior representation on the Committee, in the shape perhaps of one of the Group's two poverty experts Gordon Brown and Robin Cook.

In the event Godman and the only other Scottish MP on the Committee, Liberal Welfare spokesman Archy Kirkwood, made powerful contributions to the work of the Committee, with Godman in particular proving a forceful champion of distinctive Scottish interests. Both MP's made frequent use of the briefing material and amendments supplied by Scottish voluntary organisations. Kirkwood introduced an amendment to the Social Fund requiring that payments from the Fund should reflect a "reasonable estimate" by the Secretary of State of the regional variations in the purchasing power of income support, though he withdrew it before testing whether Labour members were prepared to support it.<sup>(19)</sup> Norman Godman introduced an amendment restoring heating benefits at levels which reflected the different cost levels in different areas of the United Kingdom, supporting his case with figures made familiar by the debate on fuel poverty and carrying the support of the Labour members.<sup>(20)</sup> Little of the distinctively Scottish material aired in Committee penetrated to the floor of the House. The only three Scots MP's to make major contributions to the Common's debates were the two Committee members and SDP Welfare Spokesman Charles Kennedy, like his two colleagues a rather junior Parliamentarian. The only other Scottish contributors were Labour MP's Gordon Brown and Hugh Brown and SNP MP's Gordon Wilson and Donald Stewart. In addition to his limited contribution to the Commons debate Gordon Brown played an important role in eliciting up-to-date poverty statistics through Parliamentary questions and as a regular conduit for leaks of DHSS papers, though his press outlets for this information was *The Guardian* and not any Scottish paper. In the House of Lords the Scottish voice was fainter with only one resident Scottish peer making a contribution and that in support of a Government proposal removing local authority discretion on free school meals.

Throughout the period of public debate the Scottish Parliamentary committees ignored the Bill and the issues it raised. In spite of the sharper political profile which the poverty issue had had in Scotland since the mid-1970's, the Scottish Select Committee has never investigated any aspect of income poverty in Scotland. (It was invited to do so as essential background to the social security reviews by SCCVO in early 1985). More surprising perhaps the issue failed to win a place on the agenda of the Scottish Grand Committee even after the publication of the Green Paper. The closest the Committee came to the issue was a debate on reform of the rating system in April 1986 when the Scottish Secretary Malcolm Rifkind was challenged to comment on the effect on low income groups in Scotland of the combined imposition of the community charge and the 20% minimum rates' contribution, but declined to do so on the grounds that the 20% proposal

had nothing to do with rating reform.<sup>(21)</sup>

The reluctance of Malcolm Rifkind as Scottish Secretary to be drawn into debate on the social security reform had been previewed by George Younger as Scottish Secretary. The letter of October 1985 criticising the Social Fund proposal sent to Mr Younger by thirty-eight Scottish voluntary organisations included a direct invitation to the Scottish Secretary to intervene in Cabinet on an issue which was outwith his Departmental responsibility but within his conventional remit as 'Minister for Scotland'. The first response, which came from the Social Work Services' Group in the Scottish Office, simply stated that responsibility for social security reviews lay with the Secretary of State for Social Services. A second response, from the Scottish Secretary's private office, repeated that social security was the responsibility of the Social Services' Secretary but promised that Mr Younger would bring the letter to Mr Fowler's attention. Indeed a leaked internal DHSS memorandum on the Social Fund reported a suggestion by the Scottish Secretary that the Fund's budget for Scotland be set to take account of the greater number of cases of special need likely to arise because of Scotland's particularly cold weather<sup>22</sup>. While denying the relevance of that particular consideration, the memorandum did concede that there might be other grounds, including the existing higher levels of single payments in Scotland, for a "proportionally higher share for Scotland" in the allocation of the Social Fund budget.<sup>(22)</sup>

Neither institutional nor constitutional factors alone explain the refusal of the Scottish Secretary to become involved in public debate on social security issues, nor his apparent refusal to make significant Cabinet interventions in defence of Scottish interests. By convention the Scottish Secretary has a licence to raise any issue of concern to Scotland. The Scottish Office's responsibility for services which powerfully influence Scotland's 'poverty profile' – housing, health, education, social work – provides a platform for intervention on social security issues as secure as the platform which the Scottish Office's economic and industrial planning functions affords for Ministerial intervention on industrial issues within the remit of Whitehall departments. If a Scottish Secretary can semi-publicly commit himself to oppose in Cabinet the closure of a major steel-making facility, why should he not commit himself to oppose social security cuts which in the course of depressing yet further the living standards of hundreds of thousands of the poorest Scots threaten to take some £50m of purchasing power out of the Scottish economy?

The reason, of course, lies in the politics of Scottish poverty. An industrial cause such as the retention of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in the early 1970s or Ravenscraig today is capable of mobilising a formidable lobby of trade unions and business interests the STUC, the CBI, the Scottish Council (D and I), and Chambers of Commerce.



The marketing of a poverty issue presents problems of a quite different order. Even when a dramatic example of poverty – hypothermia deaths among the old, the plight of severely deprived children or of the young homeless – stirs the public conscience it cannot call on the standing army of lobbyists which a major industrial issue can command. Churches and voluntary organisations are usually no match for the heavy brigade of industrial interests. Poverty in consequence is far less attractive to politicians as a campaigning issue let alone as a matter for Cabinet ultimatums.

### Conclusion

In terms of its effect on the outcome of the reforms, the Scottish response must obviously be accounted a failure. The significant concessions made by the Government – on SERPS, on Family Credit, the retention of two systems of taper for Housing Benefit, the institution of an internal appeals system for the Social Fund – were issues on which the input of the Scottish lobby was marginal to the efforts of the London based lobbies. On the substantive issues of concern to Scottish organisations the Government was adamant. The discretionary Social Fund, without any provision for independent appeal, will replace the single payments system on which so many of the poorest Scots are precariously dependent. Additional allowances will be absorbed into group premiums which are likely to be set at levels too low to compensate for the loss of the higher rate of heating allowances at least. The replacement of rates by the universal community charge will ensure that all Scots however low their income will be confronted by the need to pay 20% of the charge. Young single Scots will be forced by reductions in benefit to add to the competition in an already saturated youth labour market. Thousands of Scots children will be denied free school meals. The case for an indexation of benefits to the cost of living in different parts of the United Kingdom did not get closer to the agenda of reform than a brief hearing in Committee.

The only victories to put against the record of defeats are verbal assurances that the allocation of the Social Fund budget will take account of the exceptional level of demand in Scotland for single payments and that neighbourhood insulation schemes will receive compensation for the loss of single payment contributions.

As an exercise in public education the Scottish response can perhaps claim more success. The controversy around the Government's proposals served to expose the extent and intensity of Scotland's poverty to fuller discussion than it had received since the mid-1970s. The Committee debate on the Bill suggests that Scottish politicians can now urge recognition of the distinctive dimensions of Scottish poverty without immediately and automatically forfeiting the support of all their English colleagues.

Ruth Lister of the CPAG believes the social security reforms have boosted the poverty lobby to a new level of activity and commitment. In Scotland, the response has crystallised a new awareness of poverty and extended organisational links between interested bodies. Whether that is enough, in the absence of constitutional change giving the Scots more direct responsibility for their social condition, to generate a determined public will to combat poverty remains to be tested.

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